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THE DUTY OF THE HOUR.

BY THE HON. JEREMIAH M. RUSK, UNITED STATES SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE.

AT THE outset of this article I must be permitted to express my reluctance to become a lecturer to any class of my fellow-citizens, or to seem to seek publicity in print. Were it not that the office I hold places me, in a certain sense, before the American public as the official representative of the agricultural interests of the country for the time being, and were it not that some reflection and some argument have convinced me that an opportunity is thus afforded to address, in behalf of the cause with which I have been all my life identified, an audience which I can command in no other way, I should feel compelled to decline an invitation to contribute to these pages. I trust, however, that with the readers as with the editor of this publication the integrity of my purpose and the sincerity of my words will atone for the absence of the polished periods which usually characterize contributions to *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW*.

To every patriotic man the first suggestion from passing events or changing conditions in the affairs of his country is duty. If, therefore, in the midst of the burdens and cares of public life and the exactions of my present office, I undertake the task of a contribution to these pages, I do so only because deeply impressed with my obligation to make use of an opportunity to address a large circle of readers who, it is to be feared, rarely

NOTE.—Several of the Cabinet officers are preparing articles for *THE REVIEW*. Secretary Windom, at the time of his death, had an article partially finished upon his 2 per cent. bond scheme. Secretary Proctor has one upon the Indian question, which is held back to await the result of certain legislation. The article of Secretary Rusk in this number appears first in the series, although it was his personal preference that some of his associates should precede him.

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come into close touch with a farmer, or with one who can speak for farmers. As a farmer, then, let it be understood that I speak.

It will be unnecessary for me to call attention here to the widespread movement among the farmers of the country toward more active participation in public affairs, or to emphasize the causes to which this movement owes its present activity. The events of the past year or two have sufficiently emphasized the existence of the movement; and the average American citizen, accustomed to regard the great cities as the centres of political activity, has been astonished to find that a movement and agitation so widespread could grow to such mammoth proportions without attracting his attention. It was the indifference of the dwellers in the valley below the dam to the constantly increasing weight of the body of water which it restrained. Not until the dam is broken and the water surges down the valley, carrying everything before it, do they realize its weight and force. I am of those who believe that the farmer in politics has come to stay. More, I am of those who believe that in spite of possible, nay, inevitable, blunders on the part of men comparatively untried in the conduct of public affairs, the presence and influence of the farmer in politics will ultimately prove beneficial to the country at large. Labor finds in the hard-working farmer ready sympathy; not the thoughtless sentimental sympathy of the mere theorizer, but the practical sympathy of a man who is himself accustomed to labor for many months of the year from dawn to sundown, and who is not likely, therefore, to be carried to extremes in advocating Utopian theories regarding the privileges and rights of labor. On the other hand, capital need fear no illegitimate onslaughts on the rights of property at the hands of men who own their own homes, who till their own acres, and who owe their living to the proper administration of the little capital they possess. In the face, then, of this movement, it behooves every thoughtful American citizen who loves his country to ask himself the question, What is the duty of the hour? With this conviction I shall endeavor to point out what, in my opinion, is the duty of the hour for those of my fellow-citizens who have no direct connection with agriculture.

Not to be tedious, I shall confine myself in the present article to a consideration of but a few of the many points suggested by that remarkable phase of political agitation in which the farmers

of this country have so actively engaged. The first consideration to which I shall call attention here is that suggested by the extraordinary progress made during the past forty years in farming methods, and in what I may call farming opportunities. Those who, like myself, have witnessed the change from the tedious toil of the sickle to the triumphant march of the harvester, and from the old-fashioned to the modern plough ; who can compare the haying season in the forties with that in the eighties ; who remember the ride of ten, twenty, thirty, or even forty miles to market, where, at prices which made the farmer's heart sad indeed, the contents of the wagon were exchanged for some of the necessities of life ; and who compare these methods with the delivery of goods at the nearest station, to find a final market many hundreds of miles, perhaps, from the place of their production, or even in foreign lands across the seas,—to those, I say, whose recollection and experience can compass all these marvellous changes, all this wonderful progress in the farming industry of this country, it would certainly seem, did not actual experience show the case to be otherwise, that the farmer in the United States should to-day be among our most prosperous citizens, and that his advance in material welfare should have been fully equal to that in any other line of life. The fact that this is not so is of itself sufficient to excite surprise, and, I may even say, to suggest the apprehension to every thinking man that things are not altogether as they should be.

As a farmer who has been brought much into contact with those classes of our citizens who are not farmers, I have been frequently impressed with the prevalence among them of two characteristics in their attitude on the farming question,—one of a positive nature relating to the farmers' discontent and to what the farmers themselves have called agricultural depression ; the other, negative in its character, namely, their general ignorance—deplorable ignorance—as to the farmers' real condition, as to the needs of American agriculture, and as to its true relation to all other industries, and to the general prosperity of the country.

First, as to the grounds of the farmers' discontent, I find a disposition among non-agricultural classes to decry the extent of agricultural depression, and to magnify the farmers' disposition to complain. They appeal in support of their position to comparative statistics, showing that, even though there has been a

general lowering in the prices of many of our agricultural products in recent years, notably in cereal and animal products, yet that such reduction has not been considerable, that it is far less than is generally supposed, and that it is greatly exaggerated by the well-known disposition of farmers to bewail their condition to an extent totally disproportioned to their sufferings or necessities. They forget that to the victim of lower prices the importance of the percentage of reduction can be justly estimated only by comparison. Three, 4, or even 5 per cent. will seem trifling to the man who measures his ordinary profits by 15, 20, 25, or even 30 per cent.; but to the man whose profits rarely exceed 3 or 4 per cent. a reduction of 5 per cent. cuts into the quick. Our farmers' profits are very small, and a very slight reduction in the prices of agricultural products, especially if the low prices prevail for two or three years in succession, entails most serious consequences to the producer.

Again, these people fortify their view of matters by frequent allusions to their own early experience,—such of them as were themselves brought up on farms; and they form, as I believe, a very large proportion of successful men in other than agricultural careers. They point out, with an air of convincing argument, that in their boyhood farmers were not nearly so well off as they are to-day; that they did not enjoy the privileges they enjoy now; that markets were less accessible and prices less remunerative; that work was harder, and that, after all, the farmer of to-day should bear in mind that he is, on the whole, far better off than was his father before him. These gentlemen seem to be utterly oblivious of the fact that the very same arguments apply, but with even greater force, to all classes of our citizens; that it is not only useless but absurd to expect a citizen of a nation which boasts of its enormous strides in the path of progress, its enormous increment of wealth, and a growing prosperity which compels the wonder of the world, to be content in a condition which compares unfavorably with that of other classes of his fellow-citizens, on the ground that of this great increment of wealth, of this wonderful growth of prosperity, he has himself had a small share, and is consequently in many respects better off than his father was.

Treat men unequally, and those who are the victims of the inequality will always and justly complain. It is quite possible that here and there a farmer or representative of farmers, smarting under

a sense of injury, may so exaggerate the tribulations of the farming class as to declare that the farmers of to-day are not so well off as the farmers of a previous generation ; but a little reflection and a little argument will soon show that what he and his fellows are bewailing is the unequal distribution which has attended the growing prosperity of this country, and that the burden of complaint is not that they do not enjoy things which were beyond the reach of their fathers, or beyond their own reach in their boyhood, but that, in the general distribution of good things, the bulk of all benefits, the greater proportion of increased wealth and prosperity, has accrued to the benefit mainly of all other classes rather than the agricultural. At the same time, the farmer, as compared with fifteen or twenty years ago, is growing in intelligence and enjoys better opportunities for observation ; and he is thus led to see more clearly, to realize more painfully, the widening gulf between the prosperity of the rich man of the city and the condition of the residents of the country. More than this, he is realizing more than ever the truth of the statement so often made to him by the glib-tongued orators who have sought his suffrage, namely, that his occupation, agriculture, is truly the basis of our national prosperity.

Among those who read these pages will unquestionably be many who from time to time have expressed this sentiment. How many of those who have uttered it have thoroughly appreciated its meaning ? I deem it to be one of the duties of the hour imposed upon every patriotic American citizen, as a lesson of the times, to inform himself as to the truth of a statement which he has certainly never disputed, and which he has doubtless often expressed. Were I to attempt here to prove its truth, this article would transcend the limits to which I am anxious to restrict it. Nor is it necessary that I should here and now undertake the task. The people I address are those who have it in their own power to satisfy themselves on this point, who have access to all the sources of information from which I would cull the facts in support of this trite, but exceedingly important, statement. Assuming this truth to be undeniable, I will simply reiterate that agriculture is indeed not only the source of all our national prosperity, but the very basis and foundation of the entire national superstructure—the foundation of the dam, the weakness of which is certain to result in general disaster.

To you, public men, leaders of the people ; to you who are in high office ; to you, merchants, manufacturers, bankers and brokers, preachers and teachers ; to you, professional men,—all of whose occupations depend upon the success and prosperity of this foundation industry of them all,—I say in the most earnest manner : Learn to appreciate this truth as you never have done before ; and throughout your course of life, I implore you, let it never be forgotten.

Do not, then, ask the farmer to be satisfied with his lot on the ground that by comparison with some other period of time he is better off than people then were : it is an unreasonable request. Nor can he unequally share in the increase of our national wealth, in the general advance of national prosperity, without sooner or later, but most certainly, causing a grave disturbance in the equilibrium of national affairs. The surest guarantee to the stability of any government is to be found in the enjoyment of equal privileges by all classes of its citizens and in a just distribution among them of the benefits, as well as of the burdens, of the political structure. Not the wealth of the few, but the well-being of the many, must be our chief concern. The fact that the foundation of the superstructure is not prominently in sight is no reason for neglecting it ; indeed, the wise building inspector devotes even more of his time to the investigation of it than he does to that of walls or ceiling. In order to keep the national edifice from becoming top-heavy it behooves us, as we add to it, and improve it, and decorate it, to see that the foundations are strengthened proportionately.

Now, as to the ignorance of American citizens not farmers regarding the needs of agriculture and the conditions of the farmer, I must in this respect ask my readers to take my statement on trust, as that of a man who has had special opportunities for judging and who is conscientiously convinced of the necessity for absolute sincerity on this subject. I ask the reader to take my word for it that, great as is the ignorance of the average farmer in regard to business matters and city life, it is no greater than that of his city brother in relation to things agricultural, nor, indeed, is it as great. This being the case, we find ourselves confronted in the present grave economic emergency with a serious condition of affairs. We have a patient who is sick with a disease our physicians do not understand ; as a result the sick man and

his friends, blinded a little, perhaps, by suffering and sympathy in their efforts to arrive at a true diagnosis, yet endeavor to secure relief from suffering by such means as they can command or devise; and who shall blame them if, in the absence of physicians who know something about the case, they are perhaps misled into the adoption of certain nostrums?

The farmers at least know their own condition; and of what use is it to decry the remedies they suggest if ignorance of their true condition and of their needs makes it impossible for you to suggest one? For the last twenty-five years you have been giving the farmer and his needs little or no thought; you have been letting agriculture take care of itself and him. All other classes, all other interests and industries, existing though they do only by reason of the fact that agriculture has called them into existence and supports them, have received your consideration, have been the objects of your special study. Is it surprising, then, that, as the result of your selfishness, the farmer should be indisposed to trust any one but himself? Even when you talk to him fairly, he detects at once that, while you talk well and know much about many things, you know little or nothing of him and his surroundings. If, on the one hand, the farmer lacks business training and experience in affairs, you, on the other hand, who have both, lack to an even greater extent, and in a most pitiful degree, knowledge of agriculture, acquaintance with its followers, and familiarity with their needs and conditions.

Is it not, therefore, the duty of the hour for you who have intelligence, who have, comparatively speaking, wealth, who have for years enjoyed a large share of the country's prosperity, who have never lacked opportunity to make your wants and wishes known in legislative halls, who, in a word, share in a most generous degree in all the benefits of increased national wealth, and in all the blessings attending our grand American institutions,—is it not, I say, the duty of the hour for you, as intelligent, patriotic American citizens, to undertake at once an earnest, thoughtful study of American agriculture, to acquaint yourselves with the needs and conditions of American farmers? Remember that there are in this country five millions of farms, on which ten million workers toil unremittingly; remember that one-half of the population of this

country is dependent directly upon the fruits of their labor; that all occupations would be profitless but for the results of that labor, and that the prosperity of all other industries depends on their well-being. Remember that it was by the efforts of agricultural labor that you redeemed the bonds of this country from the hands of foreign bondholders; and remember, when you boast of our enormous and growing trade, that 75 per cent. of our exports are the product of agriculture.

In the face of facts such as these, it is certainly not an exaggeration to say that it is clearly the duty of the hour for every man who aspires to usefulness in public affairs to familiarize himself with the needs, conditions, and possibilities of American agriculture. It is the want of such familiarity that mars the full measure of usefulness of some of the most capable and eminent men in the American Congress; and, in spite of a general disposition to accord to agriculture whatever legislation may be necessary, we constantly find such legislation marred, mutilated, or obstructed by the action of some of our representatives, not as the result of any intentional antagonism, but of indifference to or ignorance regarding agricultural interests. If I may be permitted to cite an example from personal experience, I can add, in conclusion, that my experience as Secretary of Agriculture has confirmed what I must confess I anticipated, namely, that this department, though representing the greatest interest in our domestic affairs, is the one of our national departments endowed with the smallest appropriations and receiving the least consideration.

J. M. RUSK.